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THE LAUGHTER OF CHILDREN

By Beverly Cleary

Jacket illustration from *Ramona the Pest** © 1968 by Louis Darling.

ALTHOUGH CHILDREN long for laughter, too often the child's point of view is considered suspect by many adults who feel that the purpose of any book written for children is to teach; and they ask authors the earnest question, What are you trying to teach in your books?

Many children, pressured into believing that the books they

*All of Beverly Cleary's books have been published by Morrow. Many of them are available in paperback.

read should teach them a lesson, write sad little remarks in letters from school, such as "I like *Runaway Ralph* because it taught me to be satisfied with what I have." I cannot believe that a fantasy about a mouse who runs away on a miniature motorcycle to a children's camp in search of peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches does any such thing; and I feel sorry for the boy who asks, "Is the moral of *Henry Huggins* if you find a dog without a collar, you get to keep it?" The fourth-grade child who writes a desperate-sounding letter from school saying, "I read *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* and couldn't find a single thing wrong with it," is meeting a different kind of pressure; he is expected to be a critic instead of being allowed to enjoy reading. Children would learn so much more if they were allowed to relax, enjoy a story, and discover what it is they want or need from books. They might even learn to enjoy reading, especially if they find in the early grades humorous books that make them laugh.

Fortunately, in spite of all this earnestness, we have a variety of humorous books for children, for the sense of humor of authors is as varied as the sense of humor of readers. Sid Fleischman spins tall tales and period adventure stories; John Fitzgerald tells funny small-town stories in the tradition of Mark Twain; Ellen Raskin capers through madcap fantasy; Arnold Lobel is a master of gentle, whimsical stories and fables; and I happen to enjoy, in reading and writing, domestic comedy about the sort of people I have known and care about.

Although for over thirty years I have been absorbed in stories that spring from the humor of everyday life, I try not to think about humor while writing, because of the sound advice given me by my first editor Elisabeth Hamilton, whom I met after writing *Henry Huggins* and *Ellen Tebbits*. In discussing writing for children, I happened to mention humor. Elisabeth, a forceful woman, interrupted. "Darlin'," she said, "don't ever analyze it. Just do it." I have followed her advice. While I am writing, if I find myself thinking about humor and what makes a story humorous, I am through for the day; and that chapter usually goes into the wastebasket, for spontaneity has drained out of my work. Although introspection is valuable to every writer, I find that analyzing my own work is harmful because it makes writing self-conscious rather than intuitive. When I am not writing, however, I find myself mulling over the subject of

humor, my kind of humor, and why so many children find it funny.

The dictionary on my desk explains that "humor consists in bringing together certain incongruities which arise naturally from situation or character conduct." *Naturally* is a key word. Those incongruities must arise naturally in the mind of the author. The writing of humor must be spontaneous; the pages upon which a writer labors to be funny *should* go into the wastebasket. Humor must spring from a writer's view of life, and the words that appear on paper are often a surprise. These surprises, to me, are the joy of writing. My editor's advice was sound.

Children's definitions of humor differ from dictionary definitions. When I have asked eleven- and twelve-year-olds if they can tell me what humor is, they define the word in terms of television programs such as *Mork and Mindy*, or they say, "Humor is jokes." One child said, "Humor is when everything is nice," which is a child's way of agreeing with Max Eastman's statement in his book *Enjoyment of Laughter* (Simon): "The first law of humor is that things can be funny only when we are in fun." The most common definition given by children is "Humor is what makes you laugh." Most children I have met say they like best of all books that make them laugh.

As a child I would have agreed that humor is "what makes you laugh." I could not find enough laughter in life or in books, so the stories I write are the stories I wanted to read as a child in Portland, Oregon — humorous stories about the problems which are small to adults but which loom so large in the lives of children, the sort of problems children can solve themselves. I agree with James Thurber's statement: "Humor is the best that lies closest to the familiar, to that part of the familiar which is humiliating, distressing, even tragic. . . . There is always a laugh in the utterly familiar."

My first book *Henry Huggins*, a group of short stories about the sort of children I had known as a child, was written with a light heart from memories of Portland. As I wrote I discovered I had a collaborator, the child within myself — a rather odd, serious little girl, prone to colds, who sat in a child's rocking chair with her feet over the hot air outlet of the furnace, reading for hours, seeking laughter in the pages of books while her mother warned her she would ruin her eyes. That little girl, who

has remained with me, prevents me from writing down to children, from poking fun at my characters, and from writing an adult reminiscence about childhood instead of a book to be enjoyed by children. And yet I do not write solely for that child; I am also writing for my adult self. We are collaborators who must agree. The feeling of being two ages at one time is delightful, one that surely must be a source of great pleasure to all writers of books enjoyed by children.

By the time I had published five books, several things had happened which forced me to think about children and humor: I had children of my own, twins — a boy and a girl; reviews said my books were hilarious or genuinely funny; a textbook on children's literature said my books were to be read "purely for amusement"; and enough children had written to me to give me some insight into their thoughts about my books.

One phrase began to stand out in these letters from children. Letter after letter told me my books were "funny and sad." Until these letters arrived, I had not thought of *Henry Huggins* as sad. The words, at that time never used by adults in reference to my books, began to haunt me. Funny and sad, or even funny and tragic, describes my view of life. To borrow another phrase from James Thurber, I had chosen "reality twisted to the right into humor rather than to the left into tragedy" — for that is my nature. I feel that comedy is as illuminating as tragedy — more so for younger readers who may be frightened or discouraged by tragedy in realistic fiction.

The insistence on the part of many children that my books were funny and sad, while adults and other children found them funny, made me wonder where the sadness left off and the laughter began. In seeking the answer I began to observe my own children. At seven months they delighted me by laughing when I recited "The Three Little Kittens" and by making a gleeful game of refusing to open their mouths for the next bite until I spoke another line. As they grew I looked forward to the day when they would be ready for stories. What fun it was going to be — one active, outgoing boy and one quiet, imaginative girl — both full of laughter. They enjoyed *Mother Goose* and *Goodnight Moon* (Harper) and by two-and-a-half were eager and attentive listeners to stories.

I soon discovered that this pair, so full of fun but with such different personalities, were in complete agreement. Books

were serious. No matter how funny I thought a book, no matter how lively my reading, they found nothing to laugh about. *Millions of Cats* (Coward) was serious. *Babar the King* (Random) was so serious that my daughter always stood in the hall until I had finished the part about the old king dying from eating poisoned mushrooms. (Fifteen years passed before she would actually eat a mushroom.) Mrs. Tittlemouse's words "'Shuh! shuh! little dirty feet!'" — to me an amusing parody on some of my own words — were serious to them. I read a rousing (I thought) rendition of Ruth Krauss's *A Very Special House* (Harper) — a funny book about a house in which children could do anything they pleased. "Hooie, hooie, hooie," shouted the children, interrupting to imitate the sounds of the story; but when I had finished reading, both were silent, thinking. Then my son spoke up. "But Mommy," he said, "you aren't *supposed* to jump on chairs." He had me there. I had failed my children. They were too well behaved, and I was too good a housekeeper. They would never laugh at a story.

And then one day they did laugh, simultaneously, when I least expected it. I was reading Don Freeman's *Beady Bear* (Viking). Beady, a wind-up bear, had run away to a cave where his winding mechanism ran down, and he had fallen over with his feet in the air. As he lay on the floor of the cave, he heard someone approaching. I read, "'Who's there?' cried Beady, upside down" — a line that did not seem particularly funny to me. The children, however, found it hilarious. Both burst into laughter, the first time they had ever laughed at a story in a book. Every time I read that story, one of their favorites, they laughed at Beady talking when he was upside down.

The children were enjoying in *Beady Bear* what Kornei Chukovsky, in his book, *From Two to Five* (University of California) calls topsy-turvies, the sense of nonsense in which children detect absurdities and see them in relation to realities. They had detected nonsense sounds while still in their cribs and had made up their own topsy-turvies when they had begun to talk, but *Beady Bear* was the first book to give them the sense of nonsense in a story. I was convinced that Don Freeman had written one of the greatest lines in the English language. Some years later, when I met him and described the incident, he assured me that the line was indeed profound.

But the laughter of my children at the absurdity of *Beady*

ear, while telling me something about the sense of humor in ıfants, did not explain why schoolchildren found my early ooks funny and sad. The answer came from an incident involg my son and the refrigerator door. For several years he had spired to open the refrigerator all by himself. (This was before ıe days of magnetic doors.) First of all, he had to grow tall nough to reach the handle. This took several years, very long ears to him, for children are impatient to grow. When at last e was tall enough to reach the handle, he tugged and yanked, ut the refrigerator door remained stubbornly closed until one ay when he was five years old, he was so angry at the reigerator that he gave the door an extra hard yank as he was assing by. The door opened. He stared in joy and astonishment, nd with the light from the refrigerator shining on his face, he urst into laughter, his anger and frustration forgotten. For eeks, every time he opened that door, which was often, he ıughed. Opening that door was the funniest thing that had ver happened to him. Aside from the initial element of surrise, always important in humor, he laughed because he had rown.

Growth is, I believe, the essence of humor that children enjoy ı realistic stories. I now understand why *The Peterkin Papers* loughton), which librarians pressed upon me as a funny book hen I was a child, did not amuse me one bit. I took adults eriously and felt that the Peterkins were stupid instead of ınny. An overly conscientious child, I had not matured enough ı see adults in their proper perspective and did not find the eterkins funny until I was an adult.

Children laugh because they have grown. We all laugh if we ave grown. That is why we are no longer ashamed — most of ıe time — by those embarrassing experiences of childhood or outh. The time we made the whole class laugh by pronouncing ɔPENdix as APpendix and the time in a high school English ass when we were studying *As You Like It* and made the class tter by innocently asking the teacher the meaning of *maidenead* now seem funny instead of embarrassing, because we have own.

Psychologists tell us that humor is a way of relieving anxiety ıd that in every humorous incident someone is made to appear become inferior. (This information has been plucked from y morning newspaper — I certainly don't want to give the

impression that I spend my time reading psychological journals.) From what I have observed, it seems to me that children enjoy feeling superior to their younger selves and are relieved to know they have grown.

This explains why children find sad the parts of books that adults label "purely for amusement." Children are too close to some of the dilemmas of childhood to have resolved their feelings, so they are unable to feel superior to their younger selves. Children who cannot resolve these dilemmas as they grow are the ones who laugh at acts of cruelty done to others — which may be "fun" for the emotionally immature but which are never done "in fun."

Children have taught me much. They have not only told me my books were funny and sad, they were insistent about wanting a whole book about Ramona, the pesty little sister in the books about Henry Huggins. At first I paid little attention to this request, for in those days I still believed what we had been taught in library school: Children did not want to read about characters younger than themselves; and girls would read about boys, but boys would not read about girls. Gradually I saw that these generalizations did not hold if children found books funny. Many boys wrote telling me they had enjoyed *Ellen Tebbits*, and both boys and girls asked for a book about Ramona, who was younger than the writers of those letters.

As my own children reached the age of the children who read my books, I noticed that nothing was so funny to them as their memories of kindergarten and nursery school, which became the subject of many hilarious dinner table conversations. They both laughed at their younger selves, that now-amusing kindergarten pair who had wanted to be the wake-up fairy after rest time and to whom show-and-tell had been such serious business. How ridiculous to have been so childish, they felt by the time they were eight or nine. I began to understand that children would enjoy a book about a younger girl because they would recognize and enjoy feeling superior to their younger selves.

Ramona the Pest, a book I thought about for fifteen years before writing, was the result of listening to children's requests, and it has proven to be one of my most popular books with children from kindergarten through junior high school. Many children tell me they laugh at Ramona because they used to act like her or because they have a little brother or sister exactly

like her, implying that they are now much too grown-up to behave like that little brother or sister. A few, who do not always mention laughter, say they feel like Ramona. These readers have not matured enough to see their younger selves in perspective.

A five-year-old girl, whom I once asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, looked at me as if I had asked a stupid question — which of course I had — and answered, "A grown-up." To grow up is the ambition of normal children; and they want, and are sometimes starved for, humorous books because they want the assurance they have grown. As Ann Nolan Clark once said in an interview: "Anyway you look at it, it's rugged to be a child. Often I think more of us did not survive the experiences than meets the eye." I feel that books that help children laugh at their younger selves are the books that help them survive.

Children need humorous books for another reason — to convince them that reading is a worthwhile experience. Today many children are doubtful, telling me that they don't understand most books they find in the library or saying they get lost in the first chapter and don't know what the author is talking about. Many write that they find most books rotten or boring. Those who are beginning to understand that reading is something more than schoolwork tell me it is good to know there are books they can like. Those who are convinced of the joys of reading write ecstatic letters saying they love books and can't get enough of reading.

Over the years the first books to catch the imagination of children who have escaped the reading circle and are ready to discover the pleasures of reading have been simply written humorous books. Lucy Fitch Perkins's twins and Dr. Dolittle in the twenties and thirties as well as Freddy the Detective, little Eddie, Pippi Longstocking, Paddington, Encyclopedia Brown, Henry Huggins, and Ramona Quimby are characters that children have taken to their hearts. These fictional friends have made translating the lines of little black symbols a pleasure and have freed readers to grow, to progress to books of greater depth and complexity.

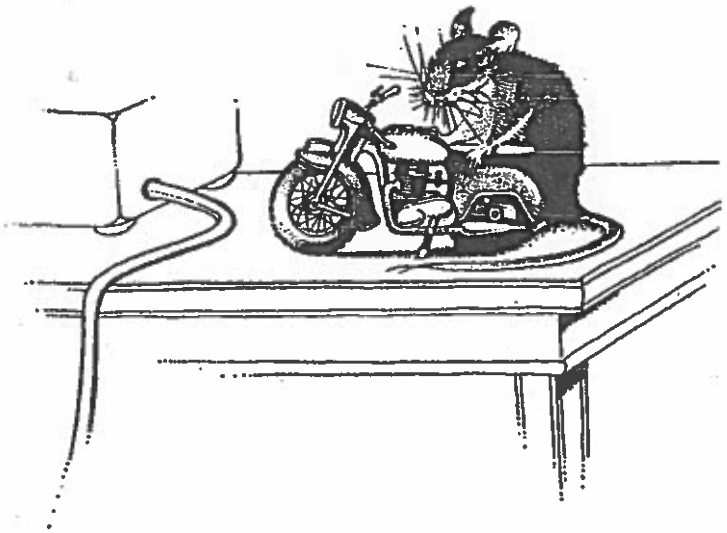
The best humor, although it may be broad, leaves room for growth. The episode that is merely a pratfall or a pie in the face will make a child laugh and may even lure him into books be-

cause he can easily understand it. Such humor is, after all, another version of topsy-turvy or nonsense humor and is valuable because it *is* easily understood. Younger readers often tell me that the incident in which a bucket of green paint falls on Henry Huggins is the funniest part of the book. These children are often the writers of those sad little letters that say, "Most books I find I can't understand." We should not underestimate slapstick humor, but as a reader matures, it will not be enough, because it does not help him gain insights into himself and the world around him. Eventually, slapstick will seem less hilarious and, in its lack of room for growth, may even seem tiresome.

A good children's book does not bore a child for a second, third, or many more readings. It does not, as teachers of children's literature tell us, bore an adult who shares it with a child. If the author has written from a double point of view, the reader will make fresh discoveries as he grows. A ten-year-old reading *Porko von Popbutton* by William Pène Du Bois (Harper) will probably read it as a funny-serious story about the triumph of a fat boy who attends a boarding school where students and administration are enthusiastic about ice hockey. A few years later, he will find the story even funnier and may laugh aloud, as my son laughed, at the satirical picture of team sports. A ten-year-old reading Marilyn Sachs's *Marv* (Doubleday) will see as something of a villain Marv's big sister Frances, who attends Hunter College and is so desperately serious about the plight of the world that she feels everything Marv invents must be practical. An older reader will find Frances touchingly funny because she *is* so desperately serious. The authors have allowed room for growth. Readers are amused and delighted to discover fresh insight, as happens when they read and reread such writers as E. B. White, Lloyd Alexander, and E. Nesbit.

To conclude, what can I say on a subject I try not to think about? Humor, that gossamer butterfly, is so elusive that some people catch only an occasional glimpse. Some, who see cruelty to others as funny, have never developed the imagination to put themselves in another's place and will never understand humor; I wonder if they will survive. Those around them may not. We read about their victims in the newspapers every day. Others, the fortunate ones, see humor all around them; few will agree on exactly what it is. Children, in a world grown grim, long for it. "Why don't authors write more books that will make

me laugh?" they ask. We can only do our best to offer children books — first, books of nonsense humor and then books in which there is room for growth — in hopes that as they read, or are read to, they will laugh and think in secret triumph, I used to do that or, I feel that way or, I am too grown-up to act that way now. To be a grownup, as the five-year-old girl reminded me, is the ambition of every normal child. Laughter helps children on their way.



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